

What is hepatitis?

Hepatitis is any kind of inflammation (a reaction which can include swelling and pain) of the liver. Hepatitis can be caused by many things including viruses (type of germ), drugs, chemicals and alcohol. At this time, there are five viruses known to affect the liver in particular. In the United States, the most common types of viral hepatitis are hepatitis A, hepatitis B and hepatitis C. These viruses are very different from one another, but all are infectious and may cause similar symptoms. They differ in how they are spread, how long the infection lasts, and how they are treated. A health care provider can test a person's blood for hepatitis A, B and C virus infection.

What is hepatitis A?

Hepatitis A, once called "infectious hepatitis," is a liver infection caused by the hepatitis A virus. It is highly contagious and can be spread easily from one person to another. Anyone can get hepatitis A, but it is more common in children. The disease is rarely fatal and does not cause chronic (long-term) liver disease. Once a person has had hepatitis A, he or she cannot get it again. There is a vaccine to prevent hepatitis A.

How is it spread?

The hepatitis A virus is spread through stool (by the fecal-oral route). This means the disease is spread by putting something in the mouth that has been contaminated with the stool of an infected person. It is often spread when an infected person is not careful about washing his or her hands after using the bathroom. For this reason, people who live with or have sex with a person who has the disease are at high risk of catching it. The virus can also be spread in programs that care for young children in diapers and in food-related businesses, such as restaurants. Hepatitis A can be spread by eating contaminated food (such as raw or undercooked shellfish) or by drinking contaminated water. Outbreaks of hepatitis A have also occurred among illegal drug users. Unlike other hepatitis viruses, hepatitis A is rarely spread through blood.

What are the symptoms?

The symptoms of hepatitis A include fever, tiredness, loss of appetite, stomach pain, nausea, diarrhea, and jaundice. The signs of jaundice are yellowing of the eyes and skin and dark urine. Teens and adults are more likely to have these typical symptoms than children. Young children with hepatitis A often have mild symptoms or no symptoms at all. Symptoms usually last less than two months. Some adults can feel sick for as long as six months, but this is rare.

How soon do symptoms appear?

Symptoms of hepatitis A, when they occur, usually appear about three weeks to a month after being exposed to the virus, but it can take from 15–50 days.

How is hepatitis A diagnosed?

Hepatitis A is diagnosed with a blood test. This blood test can tell the difference between a current infection and a past one. There are also blood tests to measure if and how much damage has been done to the liver, but these tests do not show what caused the damage.

How is hepatitis A treated?

There is no specific treatment for a person with hepatitis A. Rest and plenty of fluids are recommended. Avoid alcohol and drugs as they may cause more damage to the liver.

How can I prevent hepatitis A?

Follow the tips below. If you make them your habits, you can prevent hepatitis A—as well as other diseases:

- ✦ Always wash your hands thoroughly with soap and water before touching or eating food, after using the toilet, and after changing a diaper. When soap and water are not available, use alcohol-based disposable hand wipes or gel sanitizers. You can find them in most supermarkets and drugstores.
- ✦ Don't eat raw or undercooked shellfish.
- ✦ Always wash fruits and vegetables before eating them.

For long-term protection, hepatitis A vaccine is best. Vaccine is recommended for all children 12–23 months of age. It is also recommended for the following persons two years of age or older who are at increased risk of hepatitis A infection or complications:

- ✦ Travelers to areas with increased rates of hepatitis A.
- ✦ Children who live in states, counties and communities that have high rates of hepatitis A.
- ✦ Men who have sex with men.
- ✦ Injecting and non-injecting drug users.
- ✦ Persons who have chronic liver disease, including hepatitis C and hepatitis B.
- ✦ Persons with bleeding and clotting factor disorders.

Immune globulin (Ig) is a shot that provides short-term protection. It is used for:

- ✦ Persons who have not received hepatitis A vaccine and are exposed to hepatitis A. Immune globulin must be given within two weeks after exposure to hepatitis A virus for best protection.
- ✦ Persons who are allergic to the hepatitis A vaccine or chose not to get it, and who will be traveling to an area with high rates of hepatitis A.

Are there any restrictions for people with hepatitis A?

Yes. Because hepatitis A can easily be spread to other people, doctors are required by Massachusetts law to report cases of hepatitis A to the local board of health. To protect the public, a worker in any food-related business who has hepatitis A cannot work until his or her fever is completely gone and a week has passed since the symptoms started. Coworkers may need to get Ig. Food-related businesses include restaurants, sandwich shops, hospital kitchens and dairy or food-processing plants. This requirement also includes workers in schools, residential programs, daycare and health care facilities who feed, give mouth care, or dispense medicines.

Where can I get more information?

- ✦ Your doctor, nurse or clinic.
- ✦ Your local board of health (listed in the phone book under local government).
- ✦ The Massachusetts Department of Public Health, Division of Epidemiology and Immunization at: (617) 983-6800 or toll-free at (888) 658-2850, or on the MDPH website at <http://www.mass.gov/dph>.